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ABSTRACT

According to the authors, the real conditions of poverty and homelessness in America remain obscure. The homeless, contrary to popular belief, are not homeless by choice. 25% of the homeless are employed full-time in low-wage jobs, 25% are war veterans of one kind or another, and 25% are emotionally disturbed. According to the Rand Corporation, the most powerful predictor of personal and professional failure among children in the United States is not test scores, parental income, or parental education levels, but poverty. This article contends that the radical traditions of humanities can create a context out of which the poor can reinvent themselves and eventually transcend their economic limitations. The authors delivered the Clemente Course in Humanities on Moral Philosophy and Literature, a course based on the work of Earl Shorris. The class was offered, through Valencia Community College, at two locations in Orlando, Florida. Some of the goals of the course are to nurture a discovery or rediscovery of unlimited potential in students, to move students from reactive to reflective thinking, to instill in students the advantages of negotiation over the use of force, to demonstrate the psychological benefits of working in a group, and to emphasize the importance of family involvement. (NB)

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Poverty and the Power of Knowledge

Poverty in America, however defined, is among one of the best kept secrets in town. This conclusion is discussed at length by Earl Shorris, founder of *The Clemente Course in the Humanities*, in his *Riches for the Poor (1997/2000)*. In fact, Shorris says that poverty in America hides behind a veil. What we do not see, does not exist, or so we think. He believes, as we do, that most of us are self-insulated. The real conditions of poverty and homelessness remain obscure. Furthermore, Shorris believes that the root causes of these life-conditions into which any of us may fall at any time should be unveiled and examined if we, as Americans, are truly interested in helping to resolve these modern plagues of the human spirit. This is where education and knowledge as a source of power enter the door Shorris has courageously opened.

In fact, in Orlando, Florida, where we have lived and worked for over a decade now, the *Orlando Sentinel's* January 10, 2002 issue reported that there are at least 6,500 homeless individuals living in Central Florida. This is a 10% increase over last year at about the same time. The real number of poor and homeless individuals, however, is actually higher if other independent and more dependable demographic sources, such as *The Pew Center for the People and the Press* are accessed. Local media, therefore, tends to distort the data in order to obscure these starker realities, especially in light of the fact that Orlando, the home of Walt Disney World and other entertainment venues, would undergo a rather formidable transformation if another more realistic image of the city were disclosed. If we add to this that 44% of Florida's workforce is currently in low-wage, service jobs, is it any wonder, then, why Florida ranks 35th in the nation in median household income or why 13.3% of all households in Florida are below the poverty level? Remember that Walt Disney World is the largest employer in Central Florida. Despite this, many of its employees must work at least two or more jobs in order to make ends meet. The fact is that the data on poverty and homelessness reported by non-government sources is more accurate, suggesting that the actual situation of poor and homeless individuals in Central Florida and in America shows a much darker future than we have ever imagined. This was even the case *before* the tragic events of September 11, 2001. And it has gotten much worse.

Most Americans should know that the poor and homeless often experience, as Shorris contends, such a loss of dignity that they have been encased in what he calls '*the surround of force*' and have been excluded from what the Greek Classical Period statesman, Pericles, called '*the political life*' or from what Veniece Walker, an inmate at a Bedford Hills maximum security prison for women in a Westchester suburb located 50 miles north of New York City, called '*the moral life of downtown*'. In other words, forces such as hunger, isolation, illness, landlords, police, abuse, drugs, racism, neighbors, criminals, and agencies

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of government designed to assist the poor out of poverty actually enclose them in a '*surround of force*' which makes it virtually impossible for those trapped by such experiences to extricate themselves. It is as if these marginalized citizens of our community are condemned to poverty forever. Borrowing Veniece Walker's pungent phrase, Shorris also believes that those immersed in the abyss of poverty have been excluded from '*the moral life of downtown*' by which she meant the moral alternative to the street, such as the theater, museums, concerts, and lectures. He believes that the humanities is the way out of this conundrum because it is driven by the truth of knowledge as a source of real power and nurtures reflective rather than reactive thinking.

Since a disproportionate number of families and individuals are, in one way or another, touched by homelessness or poverty at some point in the 'dance of life', stereotypes arise which are consequently imposed on the poor involuntarily. This means that, to most of us, the poor people we see or casually bypass on the streets of those sprawling urban centers across America are there, it is assumed, because they are lazy, or irresponsible, or unmotivated, or illiterate, or on drugs. This, of course, is far from the truth. If you believe that statistics do not lie, the fact is that less than 6% of all Americans are homeless by choice, 25% of those who are homeless are employed full-time, 43% of America's poor live in city or urban centers rather than in rural areas, 25% are war veterans of one kind or another, and 25% are emotionally disturbed. According to the Rand Corporation, the most powerful predictor of personal and professional failure among children in the United States is not achievement test scores, parental income, or parental education levels, but poverty. Such data requires all of us to revise how we understand poverty and homelessness as well as what we may have thought caused both. Such stereotypes of the poor and homeless have been advanced, if you ask us, to rationalize our own apathy. A better path would be to understand, once and for all, that life throws all of us curve balls at times which we cannot hit, so we 'strike out', as it were, and find ourselves on the street with virtually no place to lay our head. *This can happen to anyone. No one is exempt.*

Of course, the answer to such a dilemma as we have tried to elaborate is multifaceted. There are many reasons for poverty in America, foremost among which is the low federal minimum per hour wage many of America's employed workers earn and the virtual absence of affordable housing in many cities throughout the United States. The road back to self-respect and dignity among America's poor is hard, very hard, and it is dangerous, very dangerous. It may include living without the benefit of shelter or food or without those we love or once loved. What is more important, however, is the role and function a humanities education, in its more unconventional form, might play in helping poor and homeless individuals find their own way out of poverty. This is why *The Clemente Course in the Humanities* **might serve as a way out for many individuals trapped by what Earl Shorris calls** *'the surround of force'*.

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Like Shorris, we believe that the humanities, especially its radical nature, and the pursuit of knowledge is the '*door*' to a recovery of self-dignity and confidence among the poor and homeless regardless of where they reside. In fact, the rationale behind *The Clemente Course in the Humanities* is based on the conclusion that poor and homeless individuals do *not* need anyone to *rescue* or *save* them from poverty or its conditions. Since everyone possesses unlimited potential, a route of escape from the abyss of poverty already resides within each person. The radical nature of the humanities, with its emphasis on philosophy, art, literature, history, logic, writing, critical thinking, and the politics of freedom, may play a functional role in this regard. It may even create a context out of which those individuals immersed in poverty may be able to reinvent themselves and eventually transcend the devastation such life-conditions have created. After all, *knowledge is power*!

Within our own context as professors of humanities at Valencia Community College, one of Florida's 28 community colleges, we took the ideas of Earl Shorris seriously and with the help of the Florida Humanities Council (FHC), the college itself, and other colleagues, partners and friends of *The Clemente Course in the Humanities* actually stopped talking about its implementation and debuted the course on October 2 of this year. To us, talk is cheap, very cheap. Action, however, is truly a horse of a different color, especially if we really believe the rationale we have already elaborated in this article which drives this rather intriguing and unique approach to education, the humanities, and the poor.

Part 1 of *The Clemente Course in the Humanities on* Moral Philosophy and Literature concluded on November 20. Students enrolled in the course met for a period of 8 weeks every Wednesday evening from 7 p.m.-9 p.m. at the following two site locations in the downtown Orlando area: *The Women's Residential and Counseling Center (WRCC)* on East Colonial Drive and *The Wells'Built Museum of African-American History and Culture* in Parramore. The class at the *WRCC*, a temporary shelter for women, included a total of 8 students; the *The Wells'Built* course had a class of 12 men from the *The Wayne Densch Center for Preferred Living*, a temporary shelter for men, including 3 students from *The Ripple Effect*, a local non-profit organization serving the needs of homeless individuals in Orlando. This initiative to employ the humanities as a 'door' out of poverty has been very successful. As a college-level, non-credit course of study, students have said that it has broadened their thinking and has made them think outside of the box. We are hopeful that a college-level, credit course of study will also be introduced sometime in 2003.

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In order to enroll in the course, students were asked to write a one to two-page application letter in which they expressed their interest in the humanities, discussed a book or story they had read which had a significant impact on their life, and explained what they hoped to get out of *The Clemente Course.* Two professors of humanities were invited to teach the courses as part of their contract load. Their competence and pedagogical style were exceptional. They are the true architects of this unique experiment in education for the multi-generational poor. Our work together with the students enrolled in these first two *Clemente Course* classes was guided by the following *Outcomes* and *Goals* which had been formerly defined before the start of the first classes:

Outcomes:

- **To nurture, as a result of the pedagogy of dialogue based on the disciplines of Moral Philosophy and Literature via use of the Socratic Method, a discovery or rediscovery of one's unlimited potential among students of *The Clemente Course***
- **To move students from reactive to reflective thinking based on their understanding of the great ideas of philosophy, art, literature, history, and logic**
- **To instill in students the advantages of negotiation over the use of force**
- **To demonstrate among students the psychological benefits of working within a group as well as the importance of mutual respect between them and their professor**
- **To emphasize the importance of family involvement in the form of more effective parenting as well as the values of reflective thinking and self-dignity as a method of transcending the cycle of multi-generational poverty**
- **To demonstrate Valencia's responsibility for building an inclusive learning community which extends beyond the boundaries of our classrooms and campuses to the community we serve**
- **To equip those individuals encased in what Earl Shorris calls 'the surround of force' with the requisite knowledge of the radical nature of the humanities so as to recover one's self-dignity based on the view of the nature of knowledge and its pursuit as a source of power**

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- **To expose students to the 'moral life of downtown' both within and outside of the classroom context (e.g., theater, museums, concerts, lectures, etc.) as the 'door' to the recovery of what Pericles called 'the political life' in the form of greater participation as citizens within the context of one's family, neighborhood, city, state, and nation**
- **To build respect for diversity as a method of increasing the opportunity for all to participate in the prosperity we seek**

Goals:

- **Successful completion of *The Clemente Course in the Humanities* by enrolled students based on defined course requirements**
- **The ritualization of successful completion of the course of study and its requirements by the presentation of a Certificate of Completion from Valencia within the context of a formal ceremony hosted by the president of the college**
- **An increased level of motivation among students, as a result of successful completion of the course and its requirements, to pursue a college-level, credit course of study at Valencia or at any other institution of higher education or to secure gainful employment**

As Dr. Sanford C. Shugart, president of Valencia Community College and avid supporter of *The Clemente Course in the Humanities* said: "I am intrigued that learning can be liberating. It empowers people with knowledge to make their way through the system. Sometimes people are trapped." This sentiment was echoed by another first-time *Clemente Course* student who said: "The most valuable thing I learned in the course is that you can overcome." What more effective outcome can we seek as teaching professionals than to know that one of our students learned something of value in our class? After all, knowledge *is* power.

John D. Scolaro and Elizabeth Eschbach are professors of humanities at Valencia Community College in Orlando, Florida. John is the Project Director of *The Clemente Course in the Humanities* and Elizabeth is a *Clemente Course* professor at *The Women's Residential and Counseling Center (WRCC).* See http://valenciacc.edu/clemente for more about *The Clemente Course in the Humanities.*

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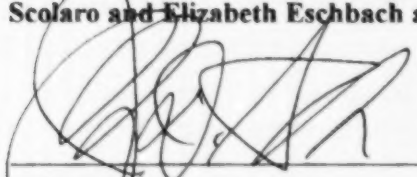
This article on "Poverty and the Power of Knowledge" was written by John D. Scolaro and Elizabeth Eschbach and is respectfully submitted on November 20, 2002.



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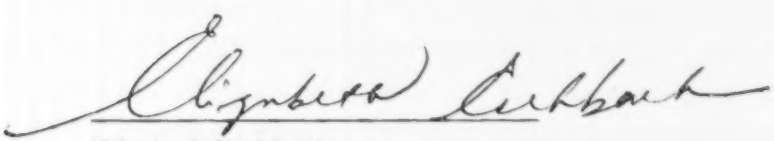

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